

WILL
WEEZIE FIND
LOVE THIS
YEAR?

Blue Christmas



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
SAVANNAH BREEZE AND HISSY FIT

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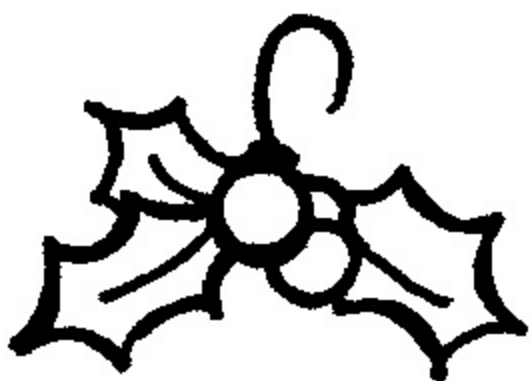
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CHAPTER 1

I was just hot-gluing the last popcorn-and—cranberry strand to the second of two five-foot-high topiary Christmas trees when my best friend came breezing into Maisie’s Daisy.

BeBe Loudermilk stopped dead in her tracks and gazed around the first floor of my antiques shop, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

She gestured toward the half-empty crates of apples, oranges, and kumquats scattered around my worktable, at the halved pineapples and the pomegranates spilling out of grocery sacks, and at the freshly fallen drifts of popcorn littering the floor.

“What the hell?” she said dramatically. There are very few statements BeBe makes that are not laden with drama.

“Are you now turning to fruit vending as a sideline?” She shook her head sadly. “And I thought you were doing so well with the antiques.”

“Christmas decorations,” I said, pressing the popcorn strings onto the surface of the topiary tree, which I’d already covered with what seemed like a whole orchard full of tiny green crab apples and kumquats. “For the historic district decorating contest.”

“Ohhh,” she said, drawing it out.

With one tentative fingertip, she tapped the tree I’d completed, knocking off a kumquat, which rolled onto the floor, joining half a dozen other pieces of fallen fruit.

“Cute,” she said dismissively.

“Cute? Is that all you can say? Cute? I’ve spent three whole days with this project. I’ve blown a good three hundred dollars on fresh fruit and nuts and Styrofoam forms, and strung what feels like ten miles of popcorn and

cranberries. And just look at my hands!”

I held them out for her to see. There were needle pricks on my fingertips, hot-glue burns on my palms, and multiple bandages from self-inflicted skewerings.

“Criminal,” BeBe said. “But why?”

“Because,” I said, “I am, by God, going to win the commercial division decorating contest this year, even if I have to cover the entire surface of this building with every piece of fresh fruit in Savannah.”

“Again . . . why would you bother? I mean, what’s in it for you?”

“Pride,” I said. “Last year I really thought I had it sewn up. Remember, I did that whole deal with the gilded palmetto fronds and magnolia leaf swags? And I had all the dried okra pods and pinecones? And I didn’t even make honorable mention? They gave first place to that stupid boutique on Whitaker. Can you believe they won with those lame-o kudzu vines and hokey bird’s nests and stuffed cardinals? I mean, stuffed birds! It was absolutely Hitchcockian!”

“A tragic oversight, I’m sure,” BeBe said, looking around the shop. “Remind me again why it was so crucial that I come over here today?”

“You promised to watch the shop,” I said. “There’s an auction at Trader Bob’s, over in Hardeeville, that starts at noon.

This close to Christmas, I can’t afford to close up while I go on a buying trip. I was also hoping you might help me put up all the decorations before I leave in an hour.”

She sighed. “All right. What are we doing?”

I gestured toward the pair of topiary trees. “Help me drag these outside. They’re going in those big cast-iron urns by the front doors. Then we’ve got to tack up the over-door plaque with the pineapples and lemons and limes, and swag the grapevines around the show windows. I’ve got two kinds of

grapes—green and red, and we’ll hot-glue those once the vines are in place. Then the only thing left is the window display. But I’ll set that up once I get back from Hardeeville.”

With a maximum amount of huffing and puffing, and some very un-Christmas-like swearing when BeBe broke an acrylic nail, we managed to get the decorations in place.

“There,” I said, standing out on the sidewalk, gazing at our masterpiece.

“Take that, Babalu!”

“Babalu who?”

“Babalu them,” I said, pointing across Troup Square.

“My nearest and queerest competition.”

“That’s not very nice,” she said. “I thought you loved gay men.”

“You don’t know Manny and Cookie,” I told her.

Manny Alvarez and Cookie Parker had opened their shop on Harris Street the previous spring. Manny was a retired landscape designer from Delray Beach, Florida, and Cookie?

Well, Cookie *claimed* he’d been a Broadway chorus boy in the road show of *Les Misérables*, but he was fifty if he was a day, going bald, and weighed close to three hundred pounds.

“I tried to be nice and welcoming. I took flowers over there on their opening day, invited them to dinner, but since the minute they opened, they’ve been trying to put me out of business,” I told BeBe. “They’ve tried to snake some of my best pickers. They called up the city and complained about my customers parking in loading zones; they even went to the gift mart and came back with the exact same line of aromatherapy candles and bath salts I carry, and now they sell them for two bucks cheaper.”

“The nerve!” BeBe said. She craned her neck to look across the square at their shop. “Looks like they’re working on their Christmas decorations too.”

Must be half a dozen men swarming around over there. Wow, look. They've got like a phone company truck with one of those cherry-picker buckets hanging lights along the front of the building."

"I'm sure whatever they do will be gaudy as hell," I said, flouncing back into the shop with BeBe following close behind. "Remember what they did for Halloween? The whole façade of the building was a red devil, with the shop's windows lit up with yellow lights as the devil's eyes."

"Hmm," BeBe said noncommittally.

"They blinked off and on all night. I thought I was having a seizure the first time I looked over there and saw it. It damn near drove me nuts," I said. "And it was so over the top."

"Not Savannah at all," BeBe agreed. "But flashy. You gotta give 'em that."

"Anybody could do what they've done," I said. "If money was no object. And those two are apparently rolling in it. I heard Manny personally donated twenty thousand dollars for the downtown business district's new Christmas lights. Of course, it's nothing but a thinly veiled attempt to buy the decorating contest."

"That is a lot of cash though," BeBe said. "Where do they get their money?"

"The old-fashioned way," I said. "Inherited. I heard Manny had a much older lover down in Florida who died two years ago. He had a start-up telecommunications company, and when he died, Manny got everything."

"Except good taste," BeBe said. I shot her a grateful look.

She really is the world's best best friend.

"All righty then," I said, wiping my hands on the seat of my jeans. "I'm gonna head over to Hardeeville. I should be back by about four. There's plenty of change in the cash register. Prices are marked on everything. Anything brown or orange should be considered Thanksgiving merchandise, and you can mark it down fifty percent. And if you see Manny or Cookie

lurking around outside, trying to steal my decorating ideas, just sic Jethro on ‘em.”

“Jethro?” She sighed heavily.

At the sound of his name, Jethro the shop dog poked his nose out from under the worktable where he’d been hiding, hoping I’d perhaps drop a sausage biscuit along with all that runaway fruit.

“He adores you,” I told BeBe. “And he’s great company.”

“He sheds,” BeBe said. “He drools. He farts.”

“At least he’s consistent,” I said, heading out the back door to my pickup truck.



CHAPTER 2

It was one of those winter mornings that remind you why you live in the south. Sunny, with a hint of coolness in the air. Despite the fact that we were less than two weeks away from Christmas, the thick grass in Troup Square was still emerald green, and Spanish moss dripped like old lace from the oaks surrounding the iron armillary in the middle of the square. And on this beautiful winter morning, I was just as thankful for what wasn't as I was for what was: no gnats, no blistering heat, no suffocating humidity.

I should have been headed in the opposite direction, but instead I turned my beat-up old turquoise truck around the square. Just a quick drive by Babalu, I promised myself. Just to reassure myself of how superior my decorations were. But my heart sank as I slowed my roll.

The three-story shrimp pink exterior of Babalu had been transformed. Twining vines magically covered the façade. A pair of towering palm trees in rococo concrete urns flanked the shop's front door, which itself was wreathed in a fabulously elaborate swag of moss, boxwood, smilax, and cedar. Everything, including the palm trees, had been painted flat white, then sprinkled with glitter. Hundreds of cut-glass chandelier prisms dangled from the white vines, and sent crystal refractions of light onto the sidewalk. It was a winter wonderland.

And standing right there on the sidewalk, directing the man in the bucket of the cherry picker, was the Snow Queen himself, Manny Alvarez.

"No, darling," he called, cupping his hands to be heard. "You've got the lights all bunched up there on the right side."

The bucket-truck had traffic blocked in front of the shop, and I had no choice but to stop behind it. My truck's brakes made a grinding noise, and Manny whirled around to see where the noise was coming from. A smile lit his face when he spotted me.

"Eloise?" he said, one eyebrow lifted. "Checking on the competition, are